

HE LOOKED LIKE A BELIEVER

Imagine a man, by all appearances a devoted believer, who goes to the finest of all possible churches, led by the finest of all possible pastors. Beyond simply attending, this man takes an active involvement with his church, serving as its controller, and having in fact been selected by the pastor to be among a very select group of core personnel. Through his years in the church, this man is provided with the opportunity to witness God's grace in action in the form of miracles, and can be considered to be a part of a truly Godly enterprise.

Imagine this man's surprise when, upon his death, he finds himself in Hell – first emotionally, then literally.

Sadly, this is a true story – the story of Judas Iscariot, one of the original twelve apostles chosen by Jesus Christ Himself. Despite his fortunate position, Jesus was led to say of him in Mark 14: 20-21: *“The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”*

I expect that it would probably shock some people to learn that the same characteristics that led to Judas' downfall are found in many supposed believers today, and if left unchallenged, will lead us to the same unhappy result. Judas was, after all, a human being, just like we are. And like all human beings, we share certain weaknesses not only with each other, but also even with Judas. Some of these weaknesses are already familiar to us, in the form of easily-recognized sins. Greed and pride are two, which come to mind as explaining Judas' behavior. But other weaknesses are less readily apparent – and it is these that many have to worry about. Since they haven't been labeled neatly as sins or widely identified as being a part of a person's possible downfall, they can “creep up” on a person, poisoning their thoughts and actions, as well as their relationship with God.

If Judas were to appear before us now, and if we were to ask him whether or not he considered himself to be a “bad” man, he would probably be surprised to even be asked the question. Why? Because before he ever betrayed Christ, he had already betrayed someone else: himself.

Judas was a master of self-deception. From what the Bible tells us about him, it would seem that he had almost a limitless ability to steer himself away from the truth – even when that truth was on display, right in front of him, in the form of the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. Even when Jesus' meanings and commands had been crystal clear, Judas was able somehow to convince himself that he knew better, that he had the right answers. While Judas might not have said it to himself this way, what he was saying effectively was this: “I know better than Jesus Christ.” To us, it is an obvious lie and an absurdity. But to Judas, it was completely believable – because it was what he wanted to believe, and what it was convenient for him to believe. Any time that we believe contrary to the Word, we do the same.

Judas wasn't just guilty of one instance of self-deception; he was guilty of many self-deceptions, all of which piled atop one another and combined to ruin him. Each of these self-deceptions reinforced the other ones, and led him further and further away from God and His will. Yet if you were to ask him, Judas would probably tell you that he was as devoted a follower of Christ as there could possibly be. Judas would be ready with a list of his virtues and his services to Christ, as well as many arguments for the righteousness of his thoughts and deeds. He would have deceived himself so completely that it would be impossible for him to recognize how he had drifted away from the wishes of God.

Self-deception, such as that of Judas, is protected by fierce and arrogant pride. Fully convinced of his own goodness, Judas believed that he was right, and no evidence to the contrary was considered by him. It is necessarily true that the self-deceived *always* believe that they are right – and usually will argue fiercely that it is so.

At one of our recent Bible Study sessions at Freedom Hill, many of my friends and fellow Bible students were shocked to hear that this man's good works and church attendance had nothing to do with salvation or eternal life, or the absence of them. Many people today share the same erroneous thoughts as Judas did, believing that the church they attend or were baptized into, or the good works that they undertake, will score them enough "points" to secure salvation. The Bible clearly tells us, however, that this is not enough; we must also believe in our hearts rather than our heads that Jesus is Lord.

Judas never believed strongly enough that Jesus was the Son of God – he wouldn't allow his thought processes or his behavior to be challenged. A scripture from John 6: 63-65 tells us that Judas never made the Word of God alive in his heart or in his spirit: *"It is the spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. **But** there are some of you who do not believe."* For Jesus knew from the beginning that they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. And He was saying, *"For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."*

Judas probably could have quoted what Jesus said verbatim. Nonetheless, during his three years with Jesus, the true meaning never made it into the core of his being; Judas never allowed the Word to take control of or direct his life. Instead, he remained addicted to his own ideas, as was shown many times in scripture. For instance, when Jesus was arrested, Judas kissed him and told the guards to protect Him and lead Him away safely, described in Mark 14:43-44: *"And immediately, while he yet spake, cometh Judas, one of the twelve, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. And he that betrayed him had given them a token, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he; take him, and lead him away safely."*

Jesus had already stated that He must suffer and rise again on the third day following. Nonetheless, Judas chose to follow his own plan, one that directly contradicted Christ's words, believing that he was assisting God's will, as seen in John 12: 4-74: *"Then saith one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which should betray Him, Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor? This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but*

because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein. Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this."

Jesus' message to Judas was clear: He was saying, "Don't look at the money, or the account balances. Look at me to see the path you should follow." But Judas wouldn't look to Christ for this understanding; his pride and his arrogance were enough that he was willing to follow his own lead over that of the Son of God – he was ready to feed the poor right to the gates of hell, rather than listen to Jesus Christ's instruction.

It is interesting to note here the important difference between the behavior of Peter and Judas. Both denied Christ; Peter, driven by fear, could not bring himself to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, even to a little girl in front of a crowd – yet in his heart, Peter *knew* Christ, and accepted his leadership and teaching. Judas, on the other hand, never accepted Christ into his heart – never truly believed that Jesus was who he said he was, and who he had proven himself to be. Judas chose to follow his own deficient "wisdom," rather than submit to the Son of God. The difference is significant: Peter went on to eternal salvation; Judas went to hell.

Judas never respected Jesus sufficiently as the Son of God, and therefore chose to follow his own will instead of God's, and this mistake earned him damnation. Likewise, we cannot be content with the work we do in our churches, great though they may be, will secure us a spot on the "saved" list, while we are dominated by our own will and not that of God. How do we ensure our own salvation? We have to do something Judas never did: we must allow God to change us. We must place the Word above our own reason and definitions. The lesson provided to us by Judas is that sometimes what we may believe in our own hearts to be "right" may well not be. It is God's Word, not our own judgment, which sets the standard – and it is this standard, rather than ones we create ourselves, which we must adhere to.

The Bible tells us that there is only one path to true salvation – and it is not the path we're following when we're following our own lead, or the world's. Matthew 7:13 says, "*Enter ye at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*" Judas didn't find the narrow path that lead to life, and neither have the multitudes of others who have chosen to let their egos and their arrogance stand between themselves and God's Word – even when they've gone to the "right" churches, said the "right" words, done the "right" things. Why? Because by following their own path, rather than Jesus', they have strayed from this narrow path – and detoured straight into oblivion. This one path leading to salvation: Jesus Christ. Any other, including the ways of the world and our own egos, leads to oblivion.

Matthew 7:21-24 reads *“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works? And then I will profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock.”* We know what that “rock” is, don’t we? It is Jesus, His Word, and His wisdom – not the influence of the world or of our own egos. Those who ask the question, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And done many wonderful works?’ – how surprised they must be when they learn that it is their lack of a relationship with Jesus, rather than the works they may have done, which determines their ultimate fate. Judas thought that his good works were enough, and that he could forego truly accepting Christ for who and what He was. And in building his house on sand, he sealed his own fate.

It is up to each of us as Christians to take a good look at the example set by Judas – and then be sure to follow the opposite path. Where Judas chose the fog of self-deception, we have to choose clear-sightedness. Where Judas chose arrogant pride, we have to choose humble submission to God and His Word, accepting His definitions of righteousness rather than our own. And where Judas chose defensiveness and denial, cloaking his thoughts and actions in layers of lies, we must choose to be open to truly and fully receive God’s Word, allowing it to work within us to expel anything that goes contrary to God’s will. And just as important, we have to recognize that many around us may be walking in the fog of self-deception, believing that they have found salvation on the basis of their works, or the church they belong to. We must do our best to lead them from this self-deception and into the light of a true relationship with Christ.

God bless,
Sebastian Lucido